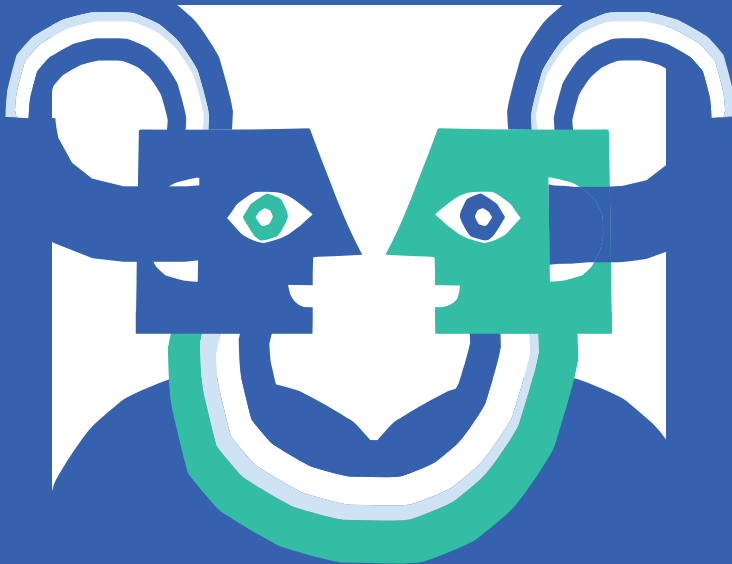


INTERNATIONAL  
COMMUNITY ARTS  
FESTIVAL  
**ICAF**

# THE SOUND OF CHANGE





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**The time that has passed since the last, planned ICAF of 2020 has caused long-lasting, far-reaching rifts across the globe. For some, it has ground their known realities of before to a halt, offering time for pause and reflection, and a significant change of pace. Yet for many more, this same period has only increased existing hardships, tensions, suffering, precarity, and loss, in forms that will last far beyond the pandemic itself.**

**sound can**  
**a song,**  
**a protest,**  
**a chant,**  
**or complex**

n be



ete silence





**We have been posed questions that relate individually, societally, organisationally, and within and between our communities, that will be carried with us into the future. In this sense, as Arundhati Roy states, the pandemic presents, “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next”.**



# **a note to the reader** **on the sound of change**

## **Dear reader,**

This small book, that now lies in your possession, is a publication about community arts and, more specifically, about how various community arts practices, worldwide, contribute to positive social change through the medium of sound. It is a collection of words, sentences and reflections that reverberate from the 9th edition of the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) that took place in March 2023, in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. A festival in which over four hundred visitors from, quite literally, all over the world amassed and assembled to share, showcase and exchange community arts knowledge and practice under the scope of the selected theme 'the sound of change'.

Over our 23-year existence as ICAF, we have come to know community arts as an art discipline of its own, with a specific set of methodologies and a unique interpretation of the role of the community and the role of the artist in the

creative process. Although community arts methodologies and outcomes can differ greatly from each other depending on the location and context, the practices share similar ethics. They all work from a space of equality and reciprocity between the artist-facilitator and the participating community; they all believe in the power of participatory art when it comes to providing a stage for unheard voices and they practice the 'art of community' by bringing together diverse groups of people. Therefore, community arts offer an approach to some of the most significant and urgent societal and social pressures we face today (polarization, discrimination, dehumanization, isolation and loneliness, to name only a few), and, at the same time, open poignant conversations about the responsibility of art, and the role of the artist in society.

To connect various community arts practices with one another as part of a wider dialogue, and to understand how the global community arts field both responds to current tensions and paves the way towards possible answers, for each edition of the festival we choose a singular thematic focus. The theme is then brought alive and deepened further through the festival programming, as well as the exchanges and engagements, and planned and unplanned moments, prior to, during, and long after the festival.

The decision to focus on 'the sound of change' came roughly two years prior to the ninth edition of ICAF. To briefly harken back to this period...the year 2021, we were still navigating lockdowns and the societal restrictions these entailed. The coronavirus had brought the world (and our festival of 2020) to a halt like nothing we had seen before in our lifetimes. We lived in a period underscored with unpredictability and precarity. During our festival brainstorm we came across Arundhati Roy's essay, 'The Pandemic is a Portal', in which she states:



**“Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture.**

**But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.”**

A note to the reader

Through Arundhati's words, and the ongoing conversations we were having with friends, colleagues and peers, it became clear to us that a theme was required that could offer us space to acknowledge the ruptures that existed, as well as the opportunity to rethink which bridges could be built towards a more collective future that centered positive change. Change was therefore a key word. During the pandemic sound and silence became ever present. From clapping for our healthcare workers, to the silence of the streets. From loud protests to the voices in all of our societies that weren't being acknowledged and heard.

'The sound of change' thus came to be and was brought to life during our festival in March '23. From moving and dancing, shouting and singing in the street as part of one large procession, to allowing the rhythm of the basketball to move us as a collective body, to using our bodies, alone and in relation in one another to converse in ways that words so often fail, to appreciating forms of language and communication that go beyond the spoken-word, we found new layers and nuance to the festival theme.



However, the triennial festival in Rotterdam is only one moment in a time period where many societal changes and challenges arise, meaning the festival also acts as a catalyst for further ruminations on the theme, as well as the ideas, perspectives, challenges and propositions that were shared. In response to this, we have decided to produce a series of pamphlet publications which each dedicate themselves to a particular thematic trajectory that arose from the foundational theme of 'the sound of change'. These texts are a deeper dive into some of the examples, contexts and approaches that were present during the festival, and each give an inspiring take on the question of how sound (or silence) is manifested in community arts projects.

For this first pamphlet publication we chose to focus on the work and practice of three exceptional community arts makers and thinkers that we feel embodied and embraced the festival theme through different, yet equally compelling ways. We assembled this team of contributors as their experience and practice span contexts, generations, disciplines, and each tackle differing yet interconnected societal pressures.

The publication begins with 'Ubuntu Soundscapes of Change', by artist, facilitator and theater maker Bonface Beti. The essay, which draws from multiple contexts from across Europe and, in particular, Africa discusses some of the fundamental methodologies used in these contexts to bring about positive change. Within Bonface's workshops in Rotterdam, he adopted the African definition of 'theater' to amplify a discursive and inclusive space where difficult conversations on cultural and interracial relations could be discussed and transformed. All in a way that nurtured empathy and joint action towards transforming and reclaiming our collective futures as a global society. Not only do we find this understanding of the term 'theater' inspiring, but also a provocative call for the redefinition of similar terminology within polarized Western societies (like the Netherlands) who need such practices to find common ground across vast difference.

This essay is followed by 'A Practice of Civil Society: The Šančiai community opera, 'Cabbage Field'', by community arts practitioners Ed Carroll and Vita Gelūnienė. This text captures in beautiful detail the durational community process that went into the making of the Šančiai community opera. It simultaneously shows us what reclaiming and redefining traditional art forms,



by bringing in participatory and community arts methodologies, can teach us about the creation and preservation of our civil societies.

The publication is then completed with 'Dancing into the Street', part-prognosis, part-manifesto by Vital Schraenen of MetX Moving Music, Brussels, Belgium. In his text Vital calls, shouts, urges us to move our individual and collective bodies into our streets, and to make ourselves, our contexts, our hopes, dreams and visions audible and visible in public space. All in the hope of creating new community rituals that bridge across backgrounds, contexts, experiences and, most importantly, differences.

So, dear reader, whether you have been to the 9th edition of ICAF in 2023 or not, this pamphlet is for any and all of you who are interested in community arts. Especially those of you who are newly embarking on your journeys into this discipline. In accompaniment with the documentation from ICAF 2023, which allows those present to relive their experiences, and new readers to immerse themselves in the festival environment, we hope these texts will provide insight, inspiration and provocation around some of the tried and tested, substantive







methodologies that make up this field. Our hope is that this publication will also engage those who may have been actively practicing in the field for years, but who are always keen to engage in refreshed dialogue, or new practices relating to the field at large.

All that is now left to do is wish you an enriching and inspirational reading experience.

With warmth,  
Amy, Jasmina and Anamaria



**Many people working in community arts in very different contexts around the globe share the belief that inclusive, participatory arts can contribute to positive change, and transformation. Yet this is an ongoing journey of evolution and transition that is not always linear or predictable in its route.**

# Ubuntu Soundscapes of Change:

The Sound of Change

A photograph of two young women sitting on red chairs against a plain grey background. The woman on the left is wearing a black jacket, black pants, and orange leggings with the word 'UBUNTU' printed on them. She has red braided hair and is holding a blue microphone. The woman on the right is wearing a light blue hoodie, black pants, and white sneakers with orange soles. She is also holding a microphone. They appear to be in a panel discussion or interview.

Reimagining our  
collective, creative  
futures

Bonface

To signal the start of the International Community Arts Festival, on the evening of Wednesday 29 March 2023, improvised drumming and musical accompaniments by Jo Zanders and Luc Mishalle from Met-X filled the foyer of Theater Zuidplein in Rotterdam and led audiences to the first location of the festival. Yet my own entrance into the main auditorium of the theatre that night had been preceded by an ongoing series of conversations with the festival organizers that would spur my journey from Nairobi, Kenya to Rotterdam, the Netherlands to facilitate a series of workshops entitled 'Sound is at the Heart of African Creativity'. In agreement with the organizers, we decided that the aim of my participation was to immerse collective reflections on the feelings and meanings evoked by the festival theme: 'the sound of change'.

Right there on that opening night, listening to the rhythmic beat of the drum, my experience of the sound of change began to unravel. Hearing these sounds as an African artist-peacebuilder and facilitator, what came up for me was indigenous African drumming sounds. These sounds conjured imagery of what I have come to define as soundscapes for peace. Such a metaphor resonated with another impulse that reverberated around my current PhD research project focusing on working with young people through theatre-making to creatively transform violent extremism in the Nairobi informal settlement of Majengo. As the days of the festival progressed, I routinely sat down with the theme in combination with the context of my own experiences. During these moments many ideas percolated within me. I began to explore the different meanings and essences of sounds of change, which eventually led me to the path of promoting intercultural understanding in giving context to my personal work, practice and life working across Africa, Europe, Asia and North America. Sound and the use of sound for change have varied in all these contexts but they are united in that they have all, in their own way, had a big impact on societies and communities.

From my experiences in Africa, I have witnessed how the arts find allyship with everyday people's lives as tools for re-examining socio-structural injustices, oppression and complex identity questions nested in religion, ethnicity, class and the traumas of exclusion. In North America, my work has created collaborative spaces as an invitation to young people, newcomer groups, and indigenous and non-indigenous communities to work on transforming systemic barriers through theater and storytelling. Working in Europe through the context of ICAF 2023 resonated with the exploration of inclusive and participatory theater practices that examine global perspectives surrounding the meaning of social change.

### **The African meaning of theater**

What was vital in my understandings of the meaning of 'the sound of change' was to explore the connection to African theater, as well as Indigenous Storytelling and Forum Theater. It is significant that 'theater' in most African settings is understood radically differently from the way theater is understood and practiced in the West. This is because most African languages have no equivalent for theater. For instance, theater in most African settings is both a formal and informal space where the division between the storyteller/performer and the spectator is easily blurred. Theater is thus a hybrid of expressive arts that includes song, dance, storytelling and dramatic skits. Theater is fundamentally used as a process of education, of passing knowledge from one generation to another and, more significantly, of resolving problems in a community. The search for meaning in the sounds of change led me to remember my work within the informal theater spaces in Nairobi, where drumming, dance, and movement have defined my work.

One such project is in Kawangware slums of Nairobi, an informal settlement where I applied theater with grassroot communities to create the story of peace. The project dubbed 'Tuende Mbele', a Kiswahili word for 'let's move forward', is led by a group of young people, who use drumming and dancing to highlight community issues such as systemic poverty, the promotion of positive sexual behavior, the reduction of HIV/AIDs prevalence and increasing safety and security for girls and women in the community. This project has raised awareness of these issues and fostered community dialogues in response.





Another important project is Sanaa 254 in Majengo informal settlement in Nairobi. The word 'Sanaa' is a Kiswahili word meaning, 'the Arts'. Majengo area of Nairobi is characterized by violent youth gangs as well as high rates of recruitment into extremist groups, such as the Al-Shabaab. As a result, the government of Kenya has responded with police brutality, leading to cycles of revenge. With Sanaa 254 we have worked on theater projects that included dance and music as well as the use of body mapping techniques to break cycles of extremist violence. In 2022 we developed a theater piece that toured the entire Majengo village to raise awareness and to transform the conflict using Forum theatre.

This body of work, which crosses borders, communities and contexts, and works across differing systems of oppression and societal friction, has laid the basis for the core methodologies required for working collectively to imagine alternative futures.

## Creative Futures through methodology, process and practice

For ICAF '23 the methodology of Forum theater formed the basis for me to create an inventive space in which each participant could be free to think, say and do whatever they felt most inclined to. The use of sound, movement, theater games and performance provided the engagement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing new forms of space, relationships, and collective, creative imagination. Through its usage, theatrical imagination can create diverse ways of being and knowing the world, including forms of being together as individuals and collectives, as well as tapping into the different 'sounds of change' that are within, between, surround, and connect us.

Drawing from participatory theater approaches such as those applied by groups like Amani People's Theatre in Kenya, the aim of my workshop was to show how the development of personal techniques and skills are necessary for the skillful exploration of conflict issues and working with and through conflict transformation. This was coupled with witnessing what such experiences can achieve towards promoting collective imagination and communal visions towards the future of social change, particularly by focusing on the roles played by artists as social imaginaries.





By embracing artistic thinking as ways of being in the world across different disciplines, the aim of my workshop was to center artistic methodologies, processes and practices. In Rotterdam 'theater' assumed the African meaning of the term. To signify and amplify a discursive and inclusive space where difficult conversations on cultural and interracial relations could be discussed and transformed. In turn, nurturing empathy and joint action towards transforming and reclaiming our collective future as a global society.

theater, like all art-forms, remains participatory, humanist and dialogic in shaping the way we see, live, interact and know our world. Dramatic arts use critical, participatory, and theoretical methods to source local modes of inquiry and representation, influence community perceptions and increase resilience. They foster interdisciplinary approaches that bring together the arts, humanities and political science as innovative responses to violent cycles. Through African and Forum Theater, participants could learn to analyze current conflicts and oppression and invite a larger community to participate in the paths towards change. Together they recognised the critical community processes used by everyday people to learn new behaviours and build inclusive peace and community structures.



The arts embrace paradox. They offer safe metaphors and work through contradictions while simultaneously mediating among competing imperatives, power differentials or worldviews. The arts can therefore create safe 'aha moments' for transitory turning points for individuals across different habituated localities and through individual or collective reflections and actions. By working with artistic aesthetics and symbols, the arts offer safe cultural passages into the human psyche, thereby shocking and raising moral consciousness towards the desire for social transformation at differing levels. This, in turn, compels individuals to experiment with notions of responsibility, freedom and belonging, passion and discipline, self-esteem and confidence, humility, transience, the eternal or spirituality.

'Sound is at the Heart of African Creativity' included different artistic practices and meanings of peace or social change. The workshop was a small rehearsal for global change processes that can be repeated and reproduced outside of, and beyond this context. Through its programme ICAF showcased how sound, storytelling and imagining-together hold the power and potential to realize collective, transformed futures that are co-created together with communities and neighbourhoods within, and as part of, our larger societies. The power of 'the sound of change' lies in the power of process and transformative spaces and embodies the practice of artists as moral imaginaries.





**This said, all great participatory artworks and processes, regardless of their size, scale or form, require us to think more deeply and richly about how we share and connect within our communities, as well as the ways in which we form knowledge, build bridges, cross borders, and dig for layers of experience, meaning and perspective beyond our own, as part of our shifting axis.**



# A practice of civil society: The Šančiai community opera 'Cabbage Field'

The Sound of Change



Ed Carroll

## People, Place, Time: Bringing the Cabbage Field Opera to Life

"I liked the approach of a dramatic piece being presented in an ordinary space, away from the deadly institutions and among people whose stories don't often get heard." - Peter van den Hurk, ICAF Founder <sup>1</sup>

The performance of 'The Cabbage Field' took place in a shed in the courtyard of a community centre in Tarwewijk, Rotterdam, overlooked on all sides by highly populated, high-rise buildings. Outside the performance space sat ICAF audiences, huddled together watching a troupe of more than thirty people singing, dancing, and playing. All were witnesses to the preparation of ingredients for cabbage soup, which unravelled the stories, experiences and contexts that made up its very recipe. Only to end 50 minutes later with an invitation to join for this traditional Lithuanian dish, accompanied with dark bread.

The space that generated this performance for ICAF 2023, developed from a body of community arts work spanning over seven years, was a 13,000-square-metre area located in the former barracks of Šanciai, Lithuania. The words of the prologue of the opera, "the army barracks flourished in art", are a reminder of the power of imagination and "the space of civil society that people occupy to collectively contest"<sup>2</sup>. The barracks were a home to the Soviet mechanisms of oppression which, over time, became a place for illegal architectural salvaging and dumping. With its ownership under Kaunas City Municipality control, the future of the site was uncertain. In today's context of aggressive urbanisation, its public value and interest is increasingly threatened by the hustle of private developers and the collusion of political authorities.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Peter van den Hurk. Accessed 2023-08-23. For those not familiar with the opera there is an unedited film of a dress rehearsal here: Šančių opera, generalinė repeticija Differdange Liuksemburgas 2022 06 09 - YouTube

<sup>2</sup> See Niall Crowley (2022) Civil Society for Equality and Environmental Sustainability: Reimagining a Force for Change. Ireland: TASC. See especially p. 6.

While working in a location which our local group came to call 'The Cabbage Field', due to its role as a food storage cellar for fermented cabbage for troops, various creative ways were found to engage the users and the environments of the site. Stories were collected and visions regarding the potential of the ground and the needs of different groups unfolded. We did not know it then, but we were forming what is known as 'heritage community', a term coined by the Faro Convention to denote the social value of cultural heritage, as created and determined by local people.<sup>3</sup> Here lay a public space, consisting of abundant nature, tangible cultural heritage, and open space environments, with potential to be a public democratic space animated by a local civil society, even in the face of political resistance.

In 2018, we became fascinated by the possibility of making an opera in response to the Cabbage Field. We believed that, as an art form, opera pulls in artists, dancers, singers and musicians. We also had the intuition that the idea of doing the performance outdoors and building the libretto from communal stories was uncharted territory. We shared our idea with local organisations, including the kindergarten, disability centre, library, as well as residents. All were open and positive to differing levels of participation.





Our first cycle of actions was a set of community writing workshops with a professional theatre director to help create the libretto. The story that emerged is both specific and universal. Set in the late 1930s in a neighbourhood where a community gathers to make pickled cabbage, two rival gangs led by Genelis and Antanas square up to each other. Antanas falls for his rival's sister, but the romance is abruptly interrupted. Men must go to war. Women must remain at home to suffer horror and violence. Though war was only a memory when we wrote the libretto, its ugliness resurfaced and became recontextualised with the backdrop of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in early 2022.



A practice of civil society: The Šančiai community opera 'Cabbage Field'

After creating the libretto, we approached composer Vidmantas Bartulis, from Šančiai, who without hesitation took to starting the task of putting music to the libretto. The next cycle was a week-long Community Opera School with professional and nonprofessional artists who supported our initiative. More than twenty local people who lived and worked in the area dedicated a week to this co-creative process. We ended this year of intense work with a night-time performance during the Balsamic Poplar Christmas Event, named after

<sup>3</sup> See Council of Europe (2005b) Explanatory Report - CETS 199 Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. Available at CETS 199 - Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (coe.int) See also Faro Convention Action Plan Handbook 2018-2019. Available at 168079029c (coe.int)

<sup>4</sup> A fuller description of each activity in the evolution of the opera is available here: OPERA - Šančių bendruomenė (sanciubendruomene.lt)

one of the oldest trees, where fragments of the community opera 'Cabbage Field' were performed.

### **An Opera that was much more than an Opera**

The foregrounding of this collaborative and collective opera process is very distant from "the dominant model of the art process that is still shaped around commodity, celebrity and consumerism and the celebration of individual self-expression as the received model of value in art"<sup>5</sup>. Rhetorical explorations about community and participation from the supply side of culture is not our field of interest. Rather, the common characteristics of this practice operate to a standard of: "Collaborative and co-creative practices, with process understood to be as important as produce; radical inclusivity and appreciation for differences as key values; Ensuring that everyone derives a sense of mastery and ownership from the experience; Understanding the people who make the work and the communities to which the work constitutes are the best judges of value, beauty and meaning."<sup>6</sup>

The creative process of the performance maintained the momentum of people's involvement. In our experience, community art follows context; it rarely makes the context. The opera process admittedly had self-contained moments, such as the community composing the libretto and the summer school, which



were stand-alone creative activities that might be seen outside of any specific context. However, it is in the context of what was happening for 'these' people and in 'this' place that kept people inside and engaged throughout the opera process. After all, it was a story about the effects of the 'loss' of identity, the 'damage' to our sense of place and belonging and the collective agency to recover.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the opera gave luminosity to how we could exist during difficult and threatening times. The following framework aided us, acting almost as an x-ray of how, through community art processes, such as the opera, a community can deepen its capability to:

**DISCOVER** cultural roots and recognise how this participates in a living heritage, identity and sense of belonging. Arnoldas Zdanevičius reflected on overcoming obstacles: "I thought that I am becoming old, and I cannot perform, sing and dance as I used to be able to do. So, for me this was a personal transformation to rediscover that I was a community artist again."<sup>8</sup>



A practice of civil society: The Šančiai community opera 'Cabbage Field'

<sup>5</sup> See Irish curator, Declan McGonagle, Hope Through The Fog: Turning Selfish into Selfless in Response to C-19 available here.

<sup>6</sup> See Arlene Goldbard (2022) In the Camp of Angels of Freedom. What does it mean to be educated? p. 109. US New Village Press.

<sup>7</sup> The technical term used to describe the policies and plans that are implemented to address loss and damage, such as those that are negotiated at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is "Loss and Damage" (uppercase "L" and "D"). See Loss & Damage (waysofrepair.com)

<sup>8</sup> Email correspondence from Opera troupe member, A. Zdanevičius. Accessed 2023-09-29

Audience member, Owen Kelly, reflected, "I thought 'Cabbage Field' was amazing both as a performance and as an idea that came to life. It was breathtaking and the pouring rain made the soup at the end even more special!" <sup>9</sup>

**CREATE** unique cultural expressions, so that they can be part of, and enrich the life of the neighbourhood. The cello player Saulius Bartulis, recalls: "The very choice of genre - the 'impertinent' idea of choosing an opera genre, and executing it with the strength of the community is simply a historical moment! In addition, the challenging decisions we had to make to create or adapt the opera to fit the space and the weather - it was astonishing to witness the high level of motivation within the group, especially when faced with tough choices."

<sup>10</sup>

Audience member, and ICAF Founder Peter van den Hurk reflected afterwards: "You made a choice to make an opera from within the story of the neighbourhood. This is a difficult choice because it's not always possible to keep the quality. Your players showed they learned the skills of dramaturgy, choreography, singing and music. Most of all, their spirit, for us as an audience, communicated authenticity." <sup>11</sup>

**SHARE** diverse cultures and creativity, so social and democratic life can be deepened by the exchange. Audience member, Violeta Đerković from Novi Sad recalled, having stayed for a second performance, that it was for her a joy to see this 'real' community art in practice - not work 'for' or 'with' communities, but a community's own creative expression 'as' community. <sup>12</sup>



**ENJOY** local cultural resources along with others, and the effect of solidarity that can be shared among everyone.

The director of the opera, Lina Puodžiukaitė, wrote: "This process challenged my knowledge of direction and choreography through working with a strong community. No matter the relationships of one's own emotions, when times get really hard, the community pulls it all together and holds everyone so tightly and strongly that it allows for magical things to be accomplished." <sup>13</sup>

Sociologist and US Fulbright Scholar, Paul Drauss was reminded of "collective effervescence and efficacy", terms coined by Durkheim, to indicate how the power of working with others "generates a kind of electricity that generates something surprising, and quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation." <sup>14</sup>

**PROTECT** through the form of opera, this community from the municipality's damaging urban development in this historic neighbourhood that would represent a loss of common cultural and natural heritage. François Matarasso wrote in reaction to the opera after seeing it performed in Differdange in 2022, "If people cannot represent themselves culturally, how can they do so in any other way, even politically? If people are only imagined and portrayed by others, how can they be free and equal members of society?" <sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Email correspondence from audience member, Owen Kelly, [www.miaaw.net](http://www.miaaw.net). Accessed 2023-06-20.

<sup>10</sup> Feedback presented in email from Saulius Bartulis, the composers' brother. Accessed on 2023-08-26.

<sup>11</sup> Feedback from Peter van den Hurk, one of the originators of the ICAF festival. Accessed 2023-09-12.

<sup>12</sup> Feedback from Violeta Đerković, activist in the Almašani Organization, Novi Sad and member of the Faro Convention Network. Accessed 2023-08-24.

<sup>13</sup> Feedback from Lina Puodžiukaitė, Opera Director and Choreographer. Accessed 2023-08-24.

<sup>14</sup> Feedback from F. Matarasso. See too Matarasso (2019) A Restless Art How participation won and why it matters (2019) Accessed 2023-08-24.

<sup>15</sup> Feedback from F. Matarasso. See too Matarasso (2019) A Restless Art How participation won and why it matters (2019) Accessed 2023-08-24. 2023-08-24.



## The Sound of Change in our future civil societies

During ICAF 2023 there was a discussion, as part of a roundtable facilitated by the Faro Convention, on the value of heritage for society, and whether community art practices can be a driver for safeguarding the heritage of people, place and stories. The Faro Convention emphasizes human rights, democracy, and rule of law.

The opera process as described herein cannot be replicated. Rather there is a method of community organising and community art proffered in which to reimagine civil society as a powerful force for real change and new and more effective forms of advocacy. Therefore, the purpose of the community opera is not purely to co-create a new 'opera' per se. More than that, this production of the imaginary derives its politics from the local social, historic context, which in turn nurtures local civil society. Power, politics and economics mimics democratic public space and participation of communities. This was our community's direct experience, and, therefore, their response.

The alternative is to be cowed in the face of a top down institutional-led culture delivered in the shadow of gatekeepers and politicians. This is not enough to express how arts and culture can be a driver for a more equal and environmentally sustainable world; how it can build the connections for change across communities; and how it can create a process that "nudges our souls to move and awaken the human community".<sup>16</sup>

If our opera process contributed to safeguarding unheard and invisible cultural heritage, then your practices can, too. If our process shows that citizen artists can combine their practice with a community's desire to preserve a sense of identity and belonging, then your practice can, too. If our opera process was able to navigate through reductive and oppressive decision making about the future of our area, then your community can, too.

Vita Gelūnienė and Ed Carroll, Kaunas, December 2023

Images by Darius Petrels

(\*) Acknowledgement: Many thanks to Peter van den Hurk, Niall Crowley, Janis Jefferies, Sheelagh Colclough, the community opera participants and members of the Faro Convention Network, Amy Gowen, Jasmina Ibrahimovic, for their helpful comments.



A practice of civil society: The Šančiai community opera 'Cabbage Field'





**For ICAF 2023 we were particularly curious about how such a complex journey of transition can be encapsulated through the medium of sound. For ICAF, sound demonstrates as equal an importance for embodying the role of the listener, as it does the speaker. Sound is a communicator, a way of empathising, sharing and expressing. Sound can be a song, a protest, a chant, or complete silence. It can be opera, music, meditation, clapping, percussion or symphony. It can be footsteps, traffic, or a voice. It is life in action; felt sensorially and bodily.**

# DANCING, INTO THE STREET!

The Sound of Change



Vital

## A CLOSING RITUAL

*A busy shopping centre and swarming hub for public transportation circles the brand-new arts centre, forming part of the landscape of a public space under construction. A no man's land between a temple for contemporary culture and an ultra-diverse society.*

*Popping up on a sunny Sunday, the roaring sounds of a gang of possessed percussionists and the echoes of self-made punk instruments. Amidst them, a mysterious rolling giant object, surrounding the dancing mob...*

*What on earth could be going on here in the south of Rotterdam? A ritual, a procession, a demonstration, a performance, a ceremony? A revolution....? The community music company MetX was the official festival resident of ICAF 2023. This inclusive, participatory community arts organisation from Brussels, Belgium makes the theme 'the sound of change' visible, audible and tangible like no other.*

*When asked what 'the sound of change' means to them, MetX gave us a wealth of responses. A lot of passion, a lot of ideas, a lot of urgency, a lot of volume, a lot of warmth and an enormous drive to bring about positive change.*

*For this pamphlet we asked artistic director of MetX, Vital Schraenen, to explain what the 'sound of change' means to him and our current societies, and what meaning their presence had during ICAF 2023.*

## DANCING INTO THE STREET!

As the festival resident of ICAF 2023, on Sunday 2 April, 2023 we were invited to close the exuberant edition of the International Community Arts festival with our project 'New Moon'. A project that combines several of the proven methodologies that form the MetX DNA: making and performing music together, combining high-quality artistic demands with accessible participation,



(re)claiming public space, and involving as many people as possible, as part of a festive happening. With 'New Moon', as with all MetX projects, we found that placing these individual elements in combination with one another provided a response that far exceeded the total of their sum...

The performance 'New Moon' was developed in the context of the Zinnode<sup>1</sup> created in 2022 for the Zinneke Parade in Belgium. For ICAF, the musical foundation consisted of an interweaving of exciting grooves played by the Leuven percussion ensemble, DROM, a project of De Batterij led by Jo Zanders, and DIY electro sounds made by ICAF festival goers, prepared by Jo Zanders and myself, during a workshop series that took place each festival morning. Placed in combination together... neo-tribal trance!

The visual element of the project was a large black disc of a 6m diameter(!). The symbol of the new moon. The new moon was a tribute to the invisible forces that influence us. At once monumental, fragile, dangerous, and mysterious. There is one catch however... this special disc can only move through the labour and efforts of human power and cooperation. In the context of the ICAF closing ceremony, enthusiastic festival goers, without preparation but with enormous willpower (and appropriate gloves!), made the moon move. Ad hoc participation!

Music and mobile phone screens travelled through the streets of Rotterdam around the 'New Moon' disc as it made its way towards the headquarters of the festival, at all times surrounded by an adjoining dancing crowd. An improvised parade in the heart of a hyper-diverse neighbourhood, animated by a colourful mix of committed artists and a passionate audience, and observed by surprised and elated passers-by and residents.

When the colourful procession came to a stop at Theater Zuidplein, the music continued to groove. The moon set and formed a symbolic end to the festival... To then only transform once again into a dance floor. The starting point of a new movement, a new story! From a collection of separate elements: rhythmic music, a huge disc, and a curious audience, a magical moment emerged at the

<sup>1</sup> A 'zinnode' is the definition of a subgroup, part of the Zinneke Parade. This is a large-scale participatory parade held in Brussels each 2 years since 2000.



end of five days of working together, partying together, and becoming one together. Instant community building - MetX style!

With this process and performance, all of which encompassed our reflections and experiences of daily practices in metropolitan Brussels, we wanted to contribute to the complex question that ICAF had posed to all of us: what is 'the sound of change?'

### An artistic story...

Despite its improvisatory character, that afternoon's performance is the result of many years of artistic research that emerged through uncountable practical experiences, (artistic, social, pedagogical) exchanges and collaborations. As well as the expression of a well-defined vision around socio-artistic art practices in a diverse urban reality.

At MetX we always start our process with ideas and input from the collaborating creative artist, no matter where they are rooted in the many diasporas that make up and enrich Brussels. All our music makers have a distinct artistic vision and practical experience, a lot of know-how, social sensitivity, pedagogical methodology and a genuine interest in multidisciplinary collaborations and inclusive work, regardless of skills or social or cultural background. We therefore trust the process and the journey their creations will take us on. The social relevance of this practice enables our artists to develop strong, participatory concepts with plenty of room for co-creation based on an artistic vision. However





radical, original, or idiosyncratic the result may be, all participants must be able to make it their own. They are both part of, and owner of the adventure.

In Brussels, as is probably the case in many other diverse cities, such as Rotterdam, many communities, groups and social classes live together. Yet too often only alongside each other. At best with some respect towards one other, but mostly with indifference. In this complex, rapidly changing context, we see our artistic creations as social change makers, as a bearer of hope. Despite their exuberant and festive nature, they subtly invite solidarity, and an exchange of perspectives, diversity, and inclusion, in a society in which these values are constantly under pressure. More than that, each of MetX's creations has the ambition to become building blocks of sustainable connections between those very communities.

As we speculate on our collective futures, our metropolises urgently need these fertile crossroads, these bridges that can be crossed, and these creative encounters. Regardless of social, religious, cultural and/or other differences, together we can, no, we must develop a new common identity that can both hold and bridge across difference and nuance. A new urban dramaturgy and a new common story needs to be written. A common language must be found. New common rituals will be the celebration of a vital togetherness that is to be discovered!

## **T A K E   T O   T H E   S T R E E T S !**

With certain MetX projects we feel the need to apply this approach on an even larger scale and across a broader context: breaking out of the stately (cultural) temples and reclaiming the streets.

For this purpose, we develop multidisciplinary performances such as popular processions or creative parades, a surreal ritual or a family celebration, a mysterious flash mob or a pop-up rave party, a militant happening or a sultry mega jam. Sometimes colourful, sometimes rough, sometimes subversive, sometimes poetic and intimate, charged with emotion. Sometimes loud, sometimes soft, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly. Never coerced or coopted. Always exciting. Always inviting.

## Why this need, this urge, this movement?

**Because** we want to break out of our comfort zones (as artists) with our projects. Away from the safety of theaters and concert halls, away from familiar audiences, away from the fourth wall! No walls but open air, concrete, and macadam...

**Because** we must always look for other audiences or, better stated, new audiences. We want to share our projects: music, poetry, fragility, and strength with all members of the hyper-diverse metropolitan population. Young, old, rich, poor, from here, and from far away. In all neighborhoods, both neglected and spoiled. In sun or rain. If it is accessible and has meaning, without imposition. Our goals are to surprise and to inspire and, above all, to invite everyone to view and experience the world differently through artistic imagination.

**Because** every participatory process, which arises in a rehearsal space from the collaboration between the artist and the participants, sooner or later must dare to confront a broad and open-minded audience. Artist, participant, and audience must enter a dynamic triangular relationship. A participatory project often has the ambition to be by and for everyone, but it must also be with everyone. The audience as the ultimate participant. Not a passive viewer, but an involved, active participant in the event.

**Because** we want to (re)claim the street! Streets and squares are often reduced to their functionality or semi-privatized consumption hubs, the community and citizens reduced to customers or passers-by. But our streets and squares are much more than that: they are places of meeting and exchange, of protest and revolt, of poetry and imagination, of celebrations and rituals, of resilience and solidarity. Socio-artistic projects are non-violent tools in the reinvention of the street of tomorrow. Examples of how it can be done differently: in ways that are more diverse, broader, crazier, with more surprise, more of the unexpected...

**Because** hyper-diverse cities such as Brussels and Rotterdam need new rituals and connecting festivities that act as bridges across the borders of different 'communities'! Every community celebrates holidays to perpetuate its own identity. There are no flaws in this, in fact: it is necessary. But if we want to

*live less next to each other and more together, then we also must invent new celebrations together. And large-scale participatory projects can play a key role in this.*

**Because**, more than 40 years after its inception, MetX wants to continue to push the boundaries, take on new challenges, detect new needs, trigger new audiences, develop new forms, make new sounds resonate, write new relevant stories, but never alone. Together!

As I am writing this, I strongly believe in the mission of MetX and for participatory arts more broadly. I also acknowledge that this togetherness and the creation of new rituals and social artistic forms is self-evident elsewhere in the world and can very much be learned from. Just think of age-old traditions that are still relevant worldwide: Haitian Carnivals, Lila ceremonies among the Gnawa community, large temple festivals in South Indian Kerala, Vodun rituals in West Africa, the Mexican Día de Muertos or the mourning processions in New Orleans, etc. It seems as if we, here in the hyper-diverse but also hyper-individualized Western world, have lost the meaning, the understanding, the desire, the usefulness of community building. As if we no longer dare to celebrate, mourn, dream, party together...

We believe that it is our role as artists (neo-shamans?), to stick our necks out and build these bridges, supported by our audience and society at large. Connecting, visionary, inspiring, inclusive, and creative. Such a symbiosis was made very much palpable on April 2 on the sun-drenched Zuidplein in Rotterdam, a possible 'sound of change'. With such a boundless, communal, vibrant energy... suddenly nothing seems impossible.





**Sound is a necessary vehicle to bring people and contexts together, to communicate with one another within our communities, and between our communities, and to connect across borders, boundaries and bridges. Sound, for us, presents interactive, affective, and empathetic experiences. It offers the option to whisper or to shout, to activate our voices to tell our stories, or to make space through silence for those who are unable to speak or be heard. To read or to write, and, ultimately, to appreciate sound as a language that everyone and anyone can understand, as we embark upon our journeys of evolution and transition, towards positive change.**

# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



The Sound of Change



## MetX

Brussels-based MetX is a production house made for and by musicians. In close collaboration with artists coming from across different horizons, they create original repertoires and music bands. Their mission is twofold: firstly, they produce and promote groups which each present an idiosyncratic and context led music practice. Secondly, they share the repertoires and knowledge of musicians for others to build on through workshops and participatory performances.

Their acoustic universe integrates elements from both the Western jazz and improvisation culture as well as from Urban Ethno - traditional music types sustained by the different cultures so easily found in an urban metropole like Brussels. Once merged with the creations of MetX musicians, this musical material evolves into a completely new artistic culture.

## Vital Schraenen

Vital Schraenen is a creative jack of all trades and one of the artistic coordinators at MetX. Mainly active in the circuit of professional theater, he works as a director, actor, playwright, scenographer, set and light designer and pedagogue. He also coordinates urban and participatory events, like Zinneke Parade, Cantania/Bozar, Día de Muertos and Fête de la Musique.

## Šančiai Community Opera

The 'Cabbage Field' Opera is the story of a former military site in Šančiai that has been reclaimed by the local community. The site itself inspired the community to dive into the generational history and narratives of the place. What they found and interpreted in this opera are stories surrounding love, war, social solidarity, and reconciliation.

The libretto was created during writing workshops by 11 nonprofessional writers. The music was composed by Vidmantas Bartulis, a recipient of the Lithuanian National Prize for Culture and Arts, who sadly passed away before the last part of the opera was finished. The director and choreographer of the opera is Lina Puodžiukaitė-Lanauskienė, and the initiators and producers are community artists Vita Gelūnienė and Ed Carroll.

### Ed Carroll and Vita Gelūnienė

Artists Vita Gelūnienė and Ed Carroll have been working with the local community since 2009. In 2014, they founded the Lower Šančiai community association in Kaunas City with other residents from the neighborhood. They engage in creative resistance to autocracy in order to nurture democratic local governance, environmental justice, a sense of belonging, as well as community-led urban planning. They are part of the Council of Europe's Faro Convention Network, which promotes cultural heritage as a human right.

**Bonface Beti**

Bonface Beti is a Kenya-based artist, storyteller and multidisciplinary practitioner working at the intersections of theater-based processes, peacebuilding and healing-centred approaches to social transformation. Since 2004 he has worked with Amani Peoples' Theatre, the Green String Network and has now founded Mama Afrika Theatre Lab for Peace and Imaginable Futures. He holds an MA degree in peacebuilding from the University of Manitoba in Canada, Certificate in Use of Arts in Peacebuilding from Canadian School of Peacebuilding as well as being a certified holder of Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback theatre trainer qualifications. He's currently admitted into the CAGs PhD program in use of Expressive Arts in Conflict transformation at European Graduate School in Switzerland and also pursuing PhD studies in Peace and Conflict Studies at University of Manitoba.





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International Community Arts Festival Rotterdam (ICAF) is a multi-trajectory, international program. It is at once a digital platform, global network, and every three years, an international festival that emerges in Rotterdam. Showcasing community arts organisations, professionals, and practices from across the world.

For the 2023 edition of the festival, ICAF curated a broad and diverse programme of lectures, workshops, performances, and showcases, all around the theme "The Sound of Change". This theme explored the power, politics and everyday lived experience surrounding sound, music, noise, silence, listening, hearing, and speaking.

This publication is part documentation, part reflection, part future-facing examination of this 2023 ICAF theme, and the multitude of responses that emerged from it.

Through all its outputs ICAF's goal is to offer space for reflection and development of the community arts movement, locally, nationally, and internationally. Everything ICAF produces is built around the idea that community art is a worldwide, cutting edge and urgent arts movement – the only one of its kind.

[icafrotterdam.com](https://icafrotterdam.com)

